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THE ENCAMPMENT OF THE HERONS.

BY W. E. ENDICOTT.

AN account of an encampment of the Herons may not be uninteresting to such as have never seen one. The herony in question was in Norfolk county, Mass., until the present year; the birds have now, however, taken up their abode elsewhere, because of the almost ceaseless persecution they have suffered. The species was the Night-heron or Quawk (*Nyctiardea Gardeni*). The bird is by no means as graceful as the other herons in figure, being thicker, with a larger and clumsier neck; as to color, however, it is quite handsome, being white, slate, and lilac. It has the long nape feathers characteristic of the herons, rolled, as usual, into the likeness of a tube. The place in which they have hitherto bred is a swamp, wet, and difficult of access, with no turf to set foot on, owing to the shade of the swamp-cedars with which the quagmire is covered, whose slippery, mossy roots furnish a doubtful footing in some cases, and a formidable obstacle in others. The certainty of "slumping" through the moss, thereby going into the thick slime above the knees, the probability of missing one's footing, and going down, full length, on breast or back, and the prospect of hard and disagreeable work in climbing to the nests, are among the allurements to the herons' paradise. The birds undoubtedly built there in 1861, though they were not found until June, 1862, when a gunner, breaking in upon their fancied security, shot over twenty for sport, threw them into a pile, and left them.

All, of course, who cared for natural history, who were few; the idlers, who were more; and many who had

never killed anything larger than a robin, and now were all agog to cover themselves with glory by shooting a quawk, frequented the spot nearly every day during that summer. The first thing which called the attention of the explorer was the whiteness of the ground, owing to the excrements of the birds; the air, hot and close, was loaded with its keen, penetrating odor; the fine particles of it, floating in the air and coming in contact with the perspiring body, made one smart all over. There was also a smell of the decaying fish which lay around, some dropped by accident by the old birds (who, I believe, never stoop to pick them up again), and much more disgorged by the young when their tree was assailed. These fish were mostly such as could not be obtained in the ponds and rivers. I once saw a piece of a pout, and once a fragment of a pickerel, but most of the remains were those of herrings. On the branches of some of the trees I have seen eels hanging with their heads digested off. The rough nests were always built against the trunks of the trees, six or eight feet from the top; and sometimes two, three, or even four might be seen in one cedar. The light-green eggs were usually four in number, but I have seen five and six repeatedly, and, once, seven in a nest. The young are downy, soft, helpless things at first, but soon gain strength enough to climb to the upper branches where they hang on with bill and claws, and are fed by their parents till nearly full-grown. Two broods are often reared in a single year, and it is no uncommon thing to see four or five of the first brood sitting on the tree-top, while the nest below contains as many more of their younger brothers and sisters; both lots, of course, to be fed by their parents. They climb clumsily, and seem, at every step, to be in immediate danger of falling,

yet it is very difficult to dislodge them. When they strike the ground they set off at full speed, and might easily escape did they not croak unceasingly as they run. The first year many of the young were carried away as pets. I kept one several weeks. No confinement was needed, for he had no more idea of running away than my hens had. Early in the morning, and for an hour or two after sunset, he would walk away into the lowlands, but would come back to his perch regularly. He was unable to forage to his complete satisfaction, however, and would sometimes try to catch my young chickens. I then took to fishing for him, and then, to my sorrow, I found out what a heron's appetite is; and thought, with pity, of the poor parent-birds in the swamp with six or eight such maws to fill. Five bream, as large as my hand, were not too much of a meal for him. He would catch them, all alive, out of the tub of water by the middle of the back, toss them up until he got them into the right position, head first down his throat; then he would swallow them by dint of great exertion, his neck presenting a curious appearance, as the fish, four inches broad, passed slowly down, making occasional convulsive attempts to struggle; a proceeding which seemed to enhance the pleasure of the bird. I once gave him a dry dead fish which he got half-way down, where it stuck; he tried and tried in vain to swallow it; then he made equally futile efforts to disgorge; then he turned his eye on me reproachfully and imploringly, so I was fain to take him between my knees, and tip up his bill and pour water down over the fish with a spoon, until the dried-up slime became again moistened, when, with a long pull and a strong pull, the bird engulfed him, gave me an ungrateful peck, and stalked off with a "q-u-a-w-k."